UNITED
NATIONS

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Security Council

Distr.
GENERAL

S/1998/197
5 March 1998

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

LETTER DATED 5 MARCH 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF CROATIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Further to your request on 3 March 1998 to submit, over the following 48 hours, Croatia's views on the situation in the Eastern Slavonia region of Croatia, and upon instructions from my Government, I have the honour to submit herewith an aide-mémoire to that end.

May I ask for your kind assistance in circulating the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Ivan ŠIMONOVIĆ
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Aide-mémoire on the situation in the Eastern Slavonia region of Croatia

1. The reintegration process in the region, specific problems notwithstanding, is an important and ongoing success resulting from fruitful cooperation between Croatia, the United Nations and the international community. This achievement should also be viewed within the context of early expectations that were quite minimal.

2. The expectations were low because the region was occupied from 1991 to 1996 by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and its local proxies (see General Assembly resolution 49/43). The occupying forces committed serious acts of ethnic cleansing, destruction and killing, bordering on genocide. Many affiliated locals still feel responsible in this regard, and fear accountability. The lack of confidence in the region stems primarily from this reality that requires time to heal. The healing process is hindered by the lack of cooperation in respect of the Yugoslav army officers Slijivancanin, Mrksic, and Radic who have been indicted for war crimes in the region. Timely punishment of individual responsibility would mitigate the negative tendency to invoke collective responsibility.

3. Since assuming executive authority on 16 January 1998, Croatia has continued its reintegration activities primarily within the programme established by the National Council for Reconciliation, the only such programme in the area. The Council's 26 February open meeting in Knin provides one example of positive results, changes and plans for the future.

4. Croatia has also begun redrafting legislation related to housing and private ownership that would accelerate the two-way return. Changes will be announced shortly. So far, over 31,000 ethnic Serbs have returned: 12,000 from the region and 19,000 from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Croatia is the only party in the region to register notable returns of persons formerly affiliated with the occupying/rebel forces.

5. The Croatian leadership, including the President and the Prime Minister, is active in reassuring ethnic Serbs about their rightful place in Croatian society. For instance, on 21 February, at the convention of the ruling party, President Franjo Tudjman called upon the membership to take on a leading role in post-war social reintegration: "HDZ must be the guarantor of the policy of reconciliation with respect to the ethnic Serb citizens of Croatia."

6. The reintegration process will continue with its peaks and troughs, but its general trend is positive. The work of the National Council for Reconciliation has been a testament to this end, and now the work of the Croatian police in the region provides additional evidence. For instance, on 14 February, 44 persons were immediately charged in relation to disruptive events in Vukovar involving the Croatian Party of Rights.

7. While the international community exercised executive authority in the region over the past two years, which included the highest measures of protection for the local population, about 40,000 persons formerly affiliated with the occupying and rebel forces nevertheless left for second countries.

8. When Croatia assumed executive authority in the region six weeks ago, the international community noted two areas of concern as crucial elements for the continued success of reintegration. The two elements were economic revitalization and local police activity. The latter has been a success, while the former remains the key source of problems in the region. As Croatia and others have often pointed out, Croatia cannot address this issue alone as it has in the past. Croatia, itself a war-torn country, has been a net provider of international aid over the past six years owing to its spending for refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

9. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other international organizations have noted that the situation in the region is stable and have emphasized problems related to economic deprivation.

10. The lack of resources for economic revitalization of the region is the main obstacle for the local population: some are discouraged by the economic prospects and are leaving, while many more are equally discouraged and are not returning. The reasons for the exodus and for the absence of return are one and the same: dire economic circumstances.

11. The international community has invested enormous political resources in the region, and continues to be engaged there through the United Nations support group, as well as through regional monitoring and corrective mechanisms, OSCE and the Council of Europe in particular. Croatia's ratification of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms allows its citizens, if need be, to seek remedy before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

12. However, monitoring alone cannot resolve the key problem in the region. The rebuilding of housing and production facilities, the creation of employment opportunities, as well as demining hold the key to the future. To this end, an international conference for the reconstruction and development of Croatia is planned for May.

13. Croatia fully subscribes to its obligations in respect of the region. It remains committed to the complete reintegration of ethnic Serbs who have recently accepted rights and responsibilities arising from Croatian citizenship into its society, and to the protection of their equal status as citizens and of their minority rights. Local antagonism towards reintegration and reconciliation should not come as a surprise. However, neither this opposition nor the obvious barriers related to lack of resources can reverse the positive trend. Croatia also remains committed to its long-standing policy of international cooperation in this regard.